General Audiences

No Archive Warnings Apply

Gen

Project Hail Mary - Andy Weir
Project Hail Mary (2026)

Ryland Grace & Rocky

Ryland Grace
Rocky (Project Hail Mary)

Whump
Emotional Hurt/Comfort
Touch-Starved
Platonic Cuddling
Platonic Soulmates
Ryland Grace Needs a Hug
Ryland Grace Acts Like a Wet Cat
Ryland Grace & Rocky are Best Friends
Depression
Mental Health Issues
Crying
Ryland Grace cries a lot
Touch-Starved Ryland Grace

English Part 1 of Platonic cuddling Next Work →

it's lonely out in space

Likelightinglass

Summary:

Grace is touch starved.

Rocky can fix.

Notes:

Hello! The book rewired my brain chemistry and I just discovered there's an active Ao3 fandom for this wet cat and his emotional support alien and I'm just happy to be here.

Please enjoy!

No movie spoilers, but there is a joke I think is 25% funnier if you've seen the movie.

Title is a line from Rocket Man by Elton John

(See the end of the work for other works inspired by this one (#children) .)

It starts out like an itch.

Just the ghost of one, at first. A phantom sensation on the skin of my arms. A tickle across my fingertips. A sense of something being off, wrong, missing. It's easy to ignore, it comes and goes and for a long time I have bigger things to worry about. Like saving two worlds and not dying in any multitude of ways.

Rocky and I are six months into our journey to Erid when the noticing becomes more frequent, more pronounced. The sensation has shifted, intensified. I scratch, but it does nothing. I find myself rubbing my fingers, my wrists, tangling and pulling at my hair. Nothing helps, and a burst of irritability accompanies every time I realize that nothing is helping. It's a buzz now, just underneath my skin, and it moves over my arms and up my shoulders and settles around my neck, weighing on me.

Rocky notices. Obviously. He knows me pretty well at this point, and is his species's foremost expert on human health. He's not happy with me the past few days since I've been arguing with him about going to bed when he says I'm supposed to. I don't even know why. There's something recently about lying there in my bunk that unsettles me. The "something wrong" I keep noticing and then ignoring is worse then, when I'm lying there in the dark. That buzzy empty feeling comes back and makes me feel like crap until I ignore it hard enough.

I hear him skitter through his tunnel behind me as I work through my checklist reviewing the ship.

"You are healthy, question?" he asks.

"Hmm?" I finished my updated supply inventory, crossing out and updating numbers. Chocolate cake with cream cheese frosting has not yet materialized in the slowly but surely diminishing kitchen. Pity. "Yeah, there's enough food for a while still, and the Taumoeba supply will be large enough soon to supplement the calories."

"Not nutrition. Something wrong with you. You are not sick, question? In pain, question?"

"No," I snap. "Doing just great!" Wow. Why was I suddenly angry? I felt fine a second ago and now I want to throw a tantrum. I squeeze my hands into fists and then rub at my neck. That itchy buzzy not itch is back.

"Not great!" Rocky says, he taps the wall with a hard knock for punctuation. *"Grace exhibits many stress responses when no stress events occuring! You keep touching your arms and face and pull at hair. Become rude for no reason."*

"I'm not sick!" I shout. "I had the medical bots check me and they've "detected no injuries or illnesses". I emphasize with finger quotes.

"When they say this, question?"

He won't like this answer. "When you were asleep," I say, looking at the floor.

"You also know something wrong! Otherwise you would not hide investigating it!!!"

"I don't want you to worry," I mutter. Now I don't feel angry and mean, I feel stupid and embarrassed and worthless. Just as bad but in a different direction.

"I worry no matter if you want! What are symptoms, question? We analyze together what is wrong with Grace, and I fix."

I sigh and sink along the wall I'm leaned up against plopping on the floor and looking over at Rocky. If I'm going to be forced to talk about my feelings I might as well do it sitting down.

"I think if something is wrong with me, it's mental."

"Problem is in brain, question? Confusion, impairment?" Rocky sounds very nervous, then drops an entire octave. *"Radiation cause sickness, question?"*

“No!” I say, and move closer to the barrier between us. “Not radiation. Not sick like your crew.” He relaxes, but only minutely. “I mean emotional. Humans are affected by emotion more than Eridians.”

He tilts his carapace forward in acknowledgement. *“Grace has much emotion. This why you leak often from eyes.”*

“Not *that* often.” That’s a lie, I definitely cry a lot. But he doesn’t need to know the human average of tears per day. Not like he can ask around. “But yeah, I’ve got…bad emotions. Not exactly sure why it’s so hard lately, considering we saved the world and you’re alive and I’m alive and there’s a reasonable amount of hope I’ll be staying alive for at least a little while.”

“You will stay alive. For long time. Full human lifespan, Eridians will ensure it.”

I admire his confidence. I have my doubts but I’d rather not spiral into that particular black hole right now. I let myself daydream for a moment about living for several happy decades on Erid. In some kind of…bubble dome, I guess. Can’t exactly go for a walk in the park without imploding in their atmosphere.

The buzzing is back at that, and my entire skin *aches*. My hand jumps to my shoulders and down my arm, trying to soothe, and that’s when I realize.

What I've been feeling isn't any kind of actual sensation, but the absence of one. I am literally feeling the lack of contact on my skin.

It’s been so *long*. And it’s going to be – its going to be *forever*. No one is going to touch me for the rest of my life, no matter how long it’s going to be. No hugs, no kissing or cuddling, not even a handshake for the rest of my eternity because my weak, squishy, pathetically touch starved body can't exist in the same air as anyone I’m ever going to be around again.

My voice makes a low whine against my will at this revelation, and yeah I’m right back to feeling horrible.

“I know what’s wrong with me,” I say.

“*What is wrong, question? Rocky will fix.”*

“You can’t,” I say miserably. Oh, and here are the tears again. Right on cue. I sniff, feeling sad and then feeling stupid about being sad and then feeling depressed about feeling stupid. I’m in for a great time when these emotions all stack up on top of each other. “New words: illness is “touch starved”. Only cure for touch starved - ‘affection’.”

“You know sickness name and you know cure, so we can heal you!”

Rocky’s excitement is great, but that’s only because he doesn’t understand it’s impossible.

“Humans value touch on each other’s bodies very much. Not reproduction related. Not everywhere. Just warm soft body parts touching other warm soft body parts feels very nice.” A very nice feeling I’m never ever getting again, not forever and ever and ever–.

“Understand. Not having good touch sensations on body for long time is hurting you, question?”

“Yep. Hurts a lot,” I say. “Hurts hurts hurts,” I emphasize numbly. I’m stretched out on the floor now, with my cheek pressed against the cold metal, sprawled out like a starfish. I’m glad I don’t have to pretend to not be a pathetic mess around Rocky. It would be very difficult.

“Define cure word. We fix. We fix soon and Grace is happy and healthy again.”

“Affection,” I say, staring at the ceiling. When was the last time I received any affection? The crew maybe? Hugs hello and goodbye with my friends? My ex girlfriend giving me a back scratch? “Touch by another person to provide physical comfort. Usually someone who loves you.”

"No understand why Grace still sad. Cure simple. Already have love person. Will design a way to provide physical comfort."

"What?" I ask. My heart jumps, my haywire emotions latch on to his phrasing. "Love person?" I ask, hopefully. I mean we did almost die for each other on a few different occasions. He's my best friend in the universe. But we've never said the word before. Suddenly, I desperately want to hear it. "You love me?"

Rocky turns his body and arms into a very exaggerated "are you serious why so stupid" look, that I've seen a few times before.

"You sure brain function not impaired question? Obvious I love you! Love love love friend Grace! Will always love love love Grace!

"Love" in Eridian has a sweet lilt to it and hearing it in triple at one octave higher than regular conversation is the nicest tune I think I've ever heard. I smile. "I love you too, Rocky."

"But…how can you show affection even if you want to?" I ask, hope dashed when I hold my hand up to the xenonite barrier and he does the same. "Can't feel anything but the wall."

He snaps his claws. *"No worry. Will find way."*

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Rocky is making something. I try to keep my distance like I'm supposed to. He told me to finish my work and then eat. He actually tells me to eat one of the "fun foods". If Rocky actually brings up food, it's serious. I also love him for suggesting it. They're limited enough that I started to save the actual meals for special occasions, its coma slurry for 95% of the time with a sprinkle of taumoeba. I guess breaking down in a depressive sob from touch starvation is kind of special.

The smell of the simple chicken, rice, sauce, and vegetable dish that steams from the warmer makes me want to cry. The taste finishes the job. This does make me feel a lot better. Rocky was smart to make sure something improves my mood if whatever he's over there inventing doesn't work. I stretch the meal out for a long time, taking small, slow bites. It's bliss.

I shift from one foot to another nervously, absentmindedly stroking up and down my forearm. It helps a little, but not much.

He calls my name a few minutes after I've finished eating. I do feel better. I think the disappointment of zero affection won't completely destroy me, at least. So I try to prepare myself for the inevitability, and make my way down to his section of the lab, where he stores all his Eridian science stuff.

"What did you–" I stop. There is a section of the barrier carved out a couple square meters large. It is replaced with a greenish brownish colored…what can best be described as a tarp. It has a loose looking quality to it. It must be xenonite, or some kind of xenonite alloy and secured effectively considering neither of us are currently dying horrible deaths from exposure to each other's atmospheres. But I have no idea why he's added an opaque window to his tunnel.

Rocky positions himself in front of it, doing jazz hands. I smile in spite of myself at his enthusiasm.

"What's this, bud?" I ask, trying to work out what he's done. Is it thinner there without compromising the barrier? He must not have been able to make this material in clear, he knows I prefer being able to see him through xenonite.

"Sit on floor, please," he trills.

I sit cross legged a few feet away. "I can't see you well through the– what is this?"

“Is membrane! New material, I make. Fix for Grace problem! Test now, then I improve if needed.”

“How?” I frown.

“Move closer,” he says, and gestures towards himself. I slide along the floor until I am right next to the tunnel, inches away from Rocky, the tarp barrier thing between us.

I'm immediately frustrated. My thoughts spiral and start rubbing my wrist and forearm again, the most recent tic I've developed to cope with this whole psychologically dying of loneliness thing. I am trying to reign in the irritability and desire to snap at Rocky for this nonsensical ”fix”, when suddenly the barrier bends outward, deforms, shaping around a three fingered claw as Rocky reaches out and lays his hand against mine.

I freeze.

It's *warm*. Like sitting in front of a fireplace, pleasantly hot but not enough to hurt, and much *softer* than it looks. Like thick fabric.

I rotate my palm upward, opening my fingers and *hold his hand*. This is surreal. I'm holding hands with someone again, being touched.

I gasp. A shuddering, shaking gasp. Tears spring to my eyes and my vision starts to blur. I am so mesmerized by our intertwined hands that I don't notice he's reached out another arm until I feel it pressing against the bicep of my other arm.

His claw strokes up over my shoulder and then down my back and I swear I *whimper*, falling against the xenonite barrier and leaning into his touch.

He stills the motion, but thankfully does not remove his hands. Well, he can’t, because I'm gripping the one intertwined with my own as if my life depends on it. Maybe it does.

“This causes pain, question?”

How do I explain to him that a few seconds of touch is recalibrating my entire nervous system? I hoped there'd be some kind of relief associated with this act, once I allowed myself to entertain the notion I would get to experience it at all, but it isn't just relief, it's a deep satiation of an intense need I hadn't realized I had.

“No pain,” I say, shaking my head, pushing back into his arms. “Please don't stop.” He's smaller than me, so I scrunch down, curling up so he can reach easier, touch more of me.

Mercifully, he starts again, a third arm circles around my waist, holding me against the barrier, where it feels like nothing but a warm blanket is between my cheek and his carapace. The other strokes down over my spine, circling geometric patterns in what is rapidly becoming the greatest backrub in the history of the universe. At least that's how it feels.

“This is repairing the touch sickness question?”

I nod, trying to speak clearly is difficult while weeping. “It feels really nice, Rocky. Thank you.”

He starts mimicking the self soothing gestures he must have seen me doing lately. Long, languid strokes over my arms, rubbing my shoulders and the nape of my neck. I sigh as he trails his claw lightly along my ears, tickling the sensitive skin behind them before stroking through my hair. He applies very gentle pressure over my scalp, smoothing out my hair and tugging gently, like running a hairbrush through the strands. It feels amazing.

I can feel my entire body relaxing, the tension that had been constant and persistent draining out of me with every stroke breathing life back into my starving skin. But I’m still trembling, inhaling shaky breath after shaky breath.

"This is enjoyable or painful, question?" Rocky asks with concern. My biological responses must be giving off mixed signals.

"Both," I say. "New word: overwhelming. When there's so much emotion it is hard to feel all of it at once. But in a good way right now." I take one of his claws and guide it back to my hair. He takes the hint.

I can't remember the last time I've felt this vulnerable and raw. "You love me?" I ask again. "Question?" I add quickly. Rocky knows my speech pretty well by now, but I don't trust enough that the inflection comes through and he won't just think I'm making a statement based on what he said before. I want him to say it again. I don't care if it's pathetic. I want to hear it again while I'm being held. I'm only human.

"Love love love Grace," Rocky reassures me. No argument, no "this is obvious" no "why Grace stupid question? He's a genius, after all, although it wouldn't take a genius to decode all these very subtle indicators I'm giving off that I am hanging by a thread in the emotional control department. He crosses his arms behind my back and pulls me close, perfectly gentle enough that the firm pressure is pure comfort. I make a sort of hum of pleasure that could almost pass for Eridian, and his superior senses let him squeeze the exact tightness that releases all sorts of endorphins without causing any damage to my squishy human body.

Very leaky human body, as the tears have started in a fresh wave, but they are pure catharsis now, relief.

"That feels really good," I say, nuzzling my face into the barrier/blanket. "Tight hug is a very pleasant touch."

"Is pleasant for me too," Rocky says with a mirror or my happy hum. *"Can hear heart rate slow from prior stress response. Enjoy feeling of holding you. Most enjoy that I can show affection in a human way for you."*

As I am apparently now living a new and exciting life in which I ask for what I need and am reasonably confident I can get it, I go a little further. "You could say…would also feel nice to hear words of praise," I say face flushing red with embarrassment. I wonder if the blush coloring is pronounced enough to affect the "roughness" he sees. At the very least I know he can hear how my heart starts to beat faster.

"Words of praise!" he says immediately and enthusiastically, patting my back with one claw in encouragement.

I burst into laughter. That's so Rocky. "That's not what I meant. But thank you."

"Then what is meaning, question? Want to say what helps Grace."

"When a human is depressed, or…touch starved," I reply, "Like me. It feels really bad. Like when human brains get stupid with no sleep, when the human brain feels bad for too long, you start thinking...bad thoughts about yourself. Like that I'm… not a good person." My voice lowers and my shoulders drop. "That no one loves me and no one ever will. That I don't deserve it."

"These thoughts bad bad bad. And false false false." He takes my hand again, and I grasp back. His other arms hold me in a gentle embrace.

"You are good human. Best human because you save all other humans. You save Rocky, and Earth and Erid. You are smart smart smart science human. Best Friend. Deserve everything. All good things. When we reach Erid, will be your home too. Will make you anything you need to be healthy and happy. Many will love you, not just Rocky."

"They will?" I ask hesitantly.

"Yes. Obvious because you save entire world, but many will want to be friend with smart smart smart human who is good good good. Will build you house in community with Earth environment for you and room for visitors and friends."

After a while of luxuriating in the wonder of being tightly embraced while being told how good and loved I am, I shift position and Rocky releases me, slowly.

“New word,” I say. “All of that was called “cuddling”.

*“I will call *****. We cuddle here how often question?”*

“Um”. I consider the question. As amazing as that experience was, and how excited I am to do it again, sitting on the floor and leaning into him is not the most comfortable position for long term. I have a sudden want. A want want want, as Rocky would say. But I feel greedy asking.

“I install membrane next to your sleeping bunk question?” He fills in for me. I flush. Am I that obvious? Probably.

“A backrub and cuddle before sleeping would be…very helpful,” I say. “I want that,” I add. I’ll just be honest. No use pretending to be stoic and proud. I don’t think that would serve either of us.

“Back rub – is this, question?” He reaches out to my back and does the pattern stroking thing again and I *melt*. Yeah. Obvious human is obvious.

“That feels good,” I say closing my eyes. I could fall asleep here. I actually might just fall asleep right here, awkward leg position be damned. “So relaxing.”

“This help wake to sleep transition? Happy to do this each day before I observe you sleep!”

Getting daily snuggles on demand is a blissful idea, but I don't want to treat Rocky like a nanny bot.

“For now, maybe, just for the next few days? Until my emotions…um…level out.” How will this be measured scientifically, I'm not sure. I guess it will have something to do with the average of how many times a day I burst into tears. Goal: average once per day. (I'm not expecting miracles).

“Why not more frequent, question? You enjoy cuddle. You much happy and sleepy.”

“Very much,” I say. No point trying to hide it. “But I know this isn't normal Eridian behavior. This isn't something you should have to do for me just because I’d like it. I don’t need it very often to still be healthy - I was only so bad because it had been years.”

Rocky thinks for an uncharacteristically long while before speaking.

“Get computer, please. Need new words and want to be sure of meanings,” he finally says.

I’m surprised. We have the translation computers around, but I need them very infrequently for everyday conversation. We usually just use it for long form culture discussions, where nuance is important. But I get up and bring the laptop over, sitting down beside him on the floor. I don't mind the short distance away now, I’m not overwhelmed with lack anymore.

“On Erid there are important items. Have cultural significance. Reminders of events or works of art. This exists on Earth as well, question?”

“Oh yeah. But lots of different words, depending on the item. And who has it, and where it is.”

*“Specific word: Important item that is only most important within a family. Given from parent to hatching and on many generations? Word is ****.*

I think for a moment. “Word is “heirloom”.

“Same word if very old, question?”

“You could modify with “antique”. That means an old item. So an antique heirloom would be an item that has been passed down for many generations. But just “heirloom” doesn't necessarily mean old.”

“Additional modifier needed meaning must handle carefully.”

“Weak?”

“Not weak. Need meaning for not strong but still have much value.”

Valuable things that can break…oh, like a china plate or a vase. “Fragile?” I supply. “Or delicate? Fragile means breaks easily. Delicate means the same but has a…softer? Sound. Anything easily broken is fragile. Delicate is like easily broken but also you don’t want to let it be broken.” I’m not a linguist but I try to do my best to convey connotation, at least to me.

“Understand. Use softer sound word.” He tells me his words and I update dutifully.

“Have delicate antique heirloom in family. Is type of clothing for ceremony. Very complex, woven metal, stone, and glass. More artwork than practical.”

“I’ll say jewelry. But that’s a broad term for an adornment that could be old and valuable. I probably don’t have a word for the exact item.”

“Not necessary. Just need words for the ideas so I can explain later. This heirloom can damage easily. When repairing, takes much time. Like making chain - many days to unwind and repair or replace, then put back together. Very complicated, need to find skilled artist to repair. Must be cleaned and polished one bead or string at a time. Can be very boring process too. What would be word for doing much much work when no interest in item?”

“Umm, like someone has to work on something but doesnt want to? Obligation.”

“Is word for obligation but more bad?”

“Burden - something you have to do against your will and also its particularly annoying or painful.” I update the software with new words. I don't know where he’s going with this. He wants to talk about how much work it takes to repair his fancy necklace from his parents?

“Much work to take care of and repair this heirloom. Maintenance is necessary when many years between uses. Some work of this kind is seen as obligation, or worse it is burden. But is not burden to care for and devote much time to something that is – need big human word for valuable thing that is delicate and you want to give great care. Very strong word for this feeling.”

Big word means hes looking for something that carries extra emphasis. I also think
I know what he wants to say.

“Word is ‘precious’,” I say softly. I update the computer with his tones for that meaning. Its a long word and I think its compound of a lot of different things. I get the sense English wouldn’t do it justice.

“Want to have as much affection with Grace as possible. You are precious precious precious. No obligation, no burden. Great honor and joy to show love and care in human touch way. Happy I can and happy you enjoy!”

Being called precious (times three!) make me grin so wide my face hurts. “You’re amazing, Rocky.”

“I know this. Told you can fix.”

I laugh, feeling much happier and lighter than I have in a long time. “You did.”

Series this work belongs to:

- Part 1 of Platonic cuddling (http://archiveofourown.org/series/5891781) Next Work → (http://archiveofourown.org/works/81767131)

Works inspired by this one:

- [Podfic] it's lonely out in space (https://archiveofourown.org/works/83552546) by Flowerparrish Pods (Flowerparrish) (http://archiveofourown.org/users/Flowerparrish/pseuds/Flowerparrish%20Pods)

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